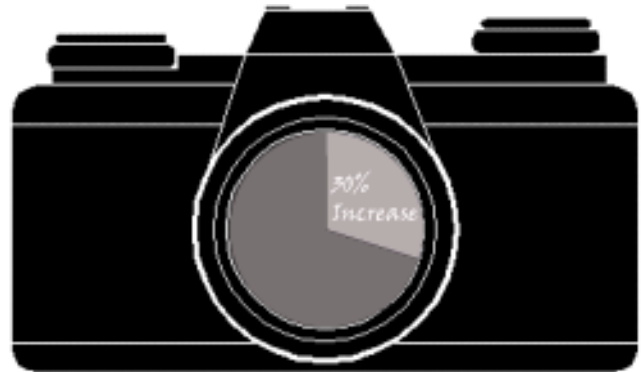


Everyone has a camera, and the film is free



*Is Big Brother
watching?
...or are we
watching Big
Brother?*

By Rick Just

Photography has been a part of outdoor recreation almost from the beginning of the technology. In 1880, when George Eastman developed flexible film for cameras, thus negating the need for heavy glass plates, outdoor photography became much more practical. Over the years many improvements followed, each making it just a bit easier or less expensive to take photos.

Nothing has had a greater impact on how we take pictures in a shorter amount of time, though, than the advent of digital photography. In the 2002 Idaho Outdoor Recreation Needs Assessment study, 33.1 percent of Idahoans reported that they took pictures as a part of their outdoor recreation activities. The replication of that survey showed that 47.5 of Idahoans were snapping pictures while recreating, a 30 percent increase just two years later.

Digital cameras are easier to use, and processing is free. Sharing your photos electronically is free, too. While cameras were once an expensive accessory, they are often now just another feature of a cell phone or PDA. They are smaller than ever, making it much more practical to have them with you all the time.

All of this will have a profound impact on how we record our lives. Once you have a camera there is little or no cost for snapping pictures. Why not take pictures of everything: bleary-eyed kids emerging from sleeping bags, the remains of the campfire, swimsuits drying on a line? The minutia of everyday life is now subject to digitization. We will likely share much more about ourselves than we would have when something wasn't "worth taking a picture."

Or will we have the opposite tendency? Since it is now so easy to correct minor flaws in photos through programs such as PhotoShop, will we ever see powerlines in a photo again? No loss there, perhaps, but will our tendency to

color correct and clone out minor irritations mislead future generations into thinking our lives, like our pictures, were flawless?

Regardless of what we decide to save to represent our time spent in the outdoors, cameras are likely to have a communication impact for land management agencies. Visitors can now easily record the condition of restrooms, trails and other facilities. With time stamping, photos become an almost irrefutable record for documenting complaints. The ability to log GPS coordinates as part of photo data will become more common in the future, adding another element of verification.

No one enjoys getting complaints. Smart administrators, though, will recognize the potential for quickly correcting problems. They will encourage such communications and make it easier for customers to get them to the right person.

One common caution for those in the public eye is "don't put anything in an email that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the local paper." Now, that front page feature might be a photo. If agencies would rather not see a picture of poorly maintained facilities staring at them over their morning coffee, it will be more important than ever to assure that facilities are maintained. Everyone has a camera, and the film is free.

Rick Just is the manager of the Comprehensive Planning, Research and Review section of the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.

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